



Arlington Mental Health & Disability Alliance

“Advocating for self-determination and dignity”

November 6, 2022

Dear Arlington Community, Members & Allies,

Arlington Mental Health & Disability Alliance (AMH&DA) cares deeply about the children of Virginia and their families. Our mission is to advocate for county, regional and state services that foster dignity, choice, recovery, and the highest possible level of participation in work, relationships, and all aspects of community life for individuals with mental illness and developmental disabilities. Our focus is on maximizing self-determination and dignity.

We are concerned about the mental health crisis among children and adolescents, and we fear the proposed "2022 Model Policies on the Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools" ("Model Policies") will worsen this mental health crisis. Therefore, AMH&DA is in solidarity with other mental health organizations like NAMI-Northern Virginia. AMH&DA opposes the Model Policies and submitted formal comments to the Virginia Department of Education.

AMH&DA is strongly supportive of efforts to protect and respect all students, and to ensure schools are free from discrimination, harassment, and bullying. Gender fluid and transgender students are a small percentage of the youth population but are at disproportionately elevated risk of depression, self-harm, and suicide. Gender fluid and transgender children are also at substantial risk of homelessness. To promote the safety of gender fluid and transgender children and enhance the safety of the school environment, counseling should be available without parental consent, including discussion of sexuality and gender identity, on the same basis as it is for students on all other topics as needed to promote a productive learning environment. See 8VAC20-620-10.

Gender fluid and transgender children will be at greater risk of physical and emotional abuse, and even homelessness, if parental consent is required before counseling can occur. They will be at elevated risk of depression and self-harm if the school refuses to provide counseling without parental consent. Indeed, youth in Virginia have a right to confidentiality and “the primary ethical obligation for confidentiality is to the students.” See ACSA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2022).

Page 2 of 2

Letter to Arlington Community, Members & Allies

November 6, 2022

Not all parents are comfortable discussing issues related to gender or sexuality. If a student feels safe involving their parents in a discussion of gender identity, by all means the school should involve them. However, if the student does not feel physically or emotionally safe doing so, they should still be provided counseling as needed to support positive mental health and educational outcomes.

Research demonstrates the need for policies that promote the safety and well-being of all students, including gender fluid and transgender students. Studies show is that using one's preferred pronouns and name or nickname, provides significant benefits -- reduced risk of suicide, depression, self-harm -- and positive outcomes in adulthood. These small courtesies support student dignity, which is part of our organizational mission.

- "Although youth who identify as a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth have among the highest rates of suicide, depression, and self-harm, a supportive and safe environment can significantly reduce these risks."
- "Acceptance of transgender youth's identities is associated with better outcomes. The corollary is also true: Denial, misgendering, and misnaming transgender youth can make things worse."
- "For each additional context (i.e., at home, school, work, or with friends) in which a transgender youth's chosen name is used, their risk of suicidal behavior is reduced by more than half."

See <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/research-shows-the-risk-of-misgendering-transgender-youth> (citing academic, peer-reviewed publications).

The Model Policy presents grave risks. A 2020 paper found that 56% of transgender youth reported a previous suicide attempt. See <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32345113>. This being so, we have shared in our comments to the Virginia Department of Education that the Model Policies if implemented *will result in completed suicides*. Please join us in supporting the dignity of everyone in our community.

Sincerely yours,

Juliet D Hiznay
Co-Chair, Steering Committee
AMH&DA

Naomi Verdugo
Co-Chair, Steering Committee
AMH&DA